

Veronica Flores-Paniagua

When I wrote Tuesday that the Bexar County Juvenile Board is the greatest administrative responsibility that local district judges have outside of the courtroom, news was out that Judge Andy Mireles had been hospitalized in critical condition after suffering a heart attack.

What I didn't relate at the time was that Mireles was chairman of the board. His death Tuesday leaves a huge void.

To understand the magnitude of the loss, it helps to know what the juvenile board does and how Mireles' leadership breathed new life into the juvenile probation and detention systems.

For the past 12 years — more than half his tenure presiding over the 73rd District Court — Mireles led the panel that's made up of the county judge and all district judges. As established by state statute, the board sets policy and direction for the juvenile probation and detention systems and submits the juvenile probation department's budget to county commissioners. The judges also hire the chief juvenile probation officer and are charged with annually visiting and certifying the county's juvenile correctional and detention facilities.

When Mireles took the reins, juvenile probation and detention facilities were in what Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff describes as the "Dark Ages." "The conditions they were working in were horrible," Wolff said.

Judge Peter Sakai, of the 225th District Court, credits the leadership of Wolff and Mireles for the ongoing modernization of the county's juvenile rehabilitation and detention facilities. But more than bricks and mortar have lifted and sustained the juvenile probation department. It's taken vision and dedication.

Over time, Mireles' interest in children prompted deeper consideration about what tools to give juvenile judges who have young offenders before them, said Chief Juvenile Probation Officer David Reilly, whose own tenure of 12½ years nearly mirrored that of Mireles. For instance, Mireles recognized there was a lack of mental health services within the juvenile justice system and several years ago brought the issue to the fore.

"We've got far more resources than we had 15 years ago, and far more options for juvenile judges," Reilly said. "Recognizing that kids needed more than just consequences: that was the hallmark of his focus."

As lawyers and others have related, the late jurist was a stickler for details and uncompromising in his expectations. That carried over to his work with the juvenile board, which taxpayers should appreciate. Sakai recalled one of the panel's quarterly meetings; Mireles was especially stern with juvenile probation staff regarding contracts for services. "He wanted to make sure all contracts had everything spelled out, every 'i' dotted and every 't' crossed," Sakai said.

Wolff doesn't expect the change in leadership that'll be necessary because of Mireles' death to cause bumps in the road for Reilly and his staff. But that's hard to fathom so soon after Mireles' passing — and so soon after the juvenile board's last meeting, held one week ago today.